Key issue

Weblogs and RSS

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A weblog (blog) is just a web page, but one that is regularly updated and usually created by one person. Blogs are widespread, largely because they are created with special software that makes them easy for anyone to put together. Originally they were primarily very personal, but now are more wide-ranging in approach. Normally written in a reverse chronological diary format, they can include images and entries and are usually brief. Updating might be done daily or merely every few days. The content is topical, and individual blogs often have a particular viewpoint, style and even personality, though those dealing with library and information matters are mostly about resources and tend to be less opinionated.

Blogs will usually have an archive of past items, and entries can be searchable. Users can offer comment on blog entries and most have a blogroll, i.e. links to related blogs or those the author finds interesting, or draws upon. There may be a trackback to show other blogs and pages that have referred to an item.

Topic areas are varied and can include: autobiographical accounts of activities, musings, even trivia; a commentary or report on public issues, maybe in particular topic areas; specialist news; a note of interesting articles, often in a subject area, with comments; or a list of new web resources. Librarians can use blogs as an information resource for themselves to learn about new resources, professional developments, new technologies, etc.

or as resources for users. Librarians can guide users to appropriate weblogs, as with web sites or discussion lists – perhaps by individual notification, a library web site section, or in subject guides. Identifying those of value from the huge number available (latest estimate is 60 million worldwide [1]) is difficult since the proportion of 'serious' ones is low and guidance is likely to be largely to those with a clear focus, rather than the more personal eclectic ones, but it depends on the audience. Naturally, librarians should try to evaluate them as for any web site.

Some information professionals are active bloggers and typical blogs are:

- *Panlibus* (http://blogs.talis.com/panlibus/) where Talis Information staff consider various library matters
- Gary Price's *ResourceShelf* (http://www.resourceshelf.com) on new resources
- *Search Engine Watch blog* (http://blog.searchenginewatch.com/blog)
- *Peter Scott's library blog* (http://blog.xrefer.com/) on events, publications, activities
- Steve Wood's *UK Freedom of Information Act blog* (http://foia.blogspot.com)
- *InfoCommerce: ruminations on the wild and wonderful world of database and directory publishing* (http://infocommerce.typepad.com/infocommerce/)
- Georgia State University's *Issues in scholarly communication*

(http://www.library.gsu.edu/news/index.
asp?typeID=62) on open access, copyright, etc.
■ Jenny Levine's *Shifted librarian* (http://www.
theshiftedlibrarian.com/) on technical gadgetry
for libraries.
(All checked June 2005.)

Many libraries produce their own blogs, although
there are not many yet in the UK. These can direct
users to useful, new or interesting resources; com-
ment on local and national events and activities in
the IT, book and library worlds; have news from
the library/information service; include subject
news and request feedback or comments. Thus
they help the library to engage with its users,
especially those who rarely visit a physical library.
It is important to keep the content changing to main-
tain interest. Some library blogs are for internal
staff use as a noticeboard about news, new
resources, changed procedures, operational prob-
lems, etc.

Creating blogs

Blog software can be free – usually with advertise-
ments – or charged at a few dollars a month for
more features and no advertisements. No HTML
skills are needed for a basic blog, as a range of
templates is usually provided to allow creation
within a few minutes. Entries are created simply
by entering text in a box. Those with HTML skills
can enhance the templates. There can be one or
more authors and blogs can be updated from
anywhere (such as during conference presen-
tations!). Blogs may be hosted externally or locally
for more control or if a number are to be produced.
Popular software includes Blogger, Blogdrive,
Typepad and Movable Type.

Finding and searching blogs

There are various directories of blogs, though none
covers more than just a small part of the 'blogo-
sphere'. These include *Blogarama (*http://www.
blogarama.com*)* and *QuackTrack* (http://www.
quacktrack.com), as well as general web direc-
tories like Yahoo. RSS aggregators (see below) also
have lists. For the library and information world
Amanda Etches-Johnson's list at http://www.
blogwithoutalibrary.net/links.html or Peter Scott's

Library weblogs (http://www.libdex.com/weblogs.
html) are useful. The content of blogs can be dis-
covered with the usual general web search services
or specialist ones like *Daypop* (http://www.
daypop.com), *Blogsearchengine* (http://www.
blogsearchengine.com/) and *Feedster* (http://www.
feedster.com). Some RSS aggregators include a
search facility.

RSS/newsfeeds/webfeeds

Blogs can be managed by bookmarking them as
with any web page, but that can be tedious if there
are a lot you want to read, nor do you know when
there is new content. RSS technology – if it
has been used by a blog – makes it easy to keep up
to date. RSS is an XML (eXtensible Markup
Language) tag for a page that allows the content or
headlines of new items in a weblog to be pulled
automatically into special reader software. More
importantly, it can work with other types of
frequently changeable web site, such as directories
of web sites or learning materials, local and
national newspapers, broadcast news, etc., to
provide feeds. Again, it depends if it has been
used: for example, only some journal contents are
available in this way. Thus one service is
monitored for new content, not dozens. The free
reader software – an aggregator – may be on a PC
or may be a web-based subscription service.
Sources to be monitored can be chosen from their
list and others can be added. Headlines will be
updated regularly (usually every few hours), with
the unread ones showing at each login, rather like
an e-mail inbox.

There's a good choice of ways of reading RSS
feeds. Desktop software includes *Amphetadesk* (http:
//www.disobey.com/amphetadesk) and *FeedReader*
(http://www.feedreader.com); web-based services
include *Bloglines* (http://www.bloglines.com) and
MyFeedster (http://my.feedster.com). There are
RSS extensions to the Opera and Firefox browsers
and services like *You subscribe* (http://www.
yousoftware.com/subscribe) that work with Out-
look mail.

External feeds can be used for personal develop-
ment and awareness, or to help identify informa-
tion resources to forward to colleagues and users,
as examples to encourage users to see RSS feeds as
useful knowledge or to include in library web
pages. Such feeds might be new web resources,

e-journal contents (e.g. IngentaConnect), publisher news from a single source, like the Institute of Physics or one that covers many, like *Moreover – Book publishing news* (http://www.moreover. com/rss). Other examples include subject news, e.g. *EEVL Onestep news* (http://www.eevl.ac.uk/ onestepnews) that pulls in from many sources; news alerts, e.g. from saved searches in Yahoo; search alerts, e.g. from the FindArticles.com article database or a blogs collection; and more general information like local weather.

Libraries might create their own RSS feeds from their systems and services, such as new books added to stock, overdue books, additions to local databases, as well as from any library blogs they produce. The potential is endless.

Reference

1. Worldwide blog count for May: now over 60 million blogs: http://www.blogherald.com/2005/05/25/ world-wide-blog-count-for-may-now-over-60-million-blogs/

Further reading

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Moffat, M., *RSS – a primer for publishers and content providers,* 2003, EEVL. http://www.eevl.ac.uk/rss_primer

RSS compendium: http://allrss.com

Weblogs Compendium: (http://www.lights.com/weblogs/

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